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ABSTRACT

The Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) was designed by Sir James Pitman as a reading teaching medium from which immediate and efficient transition may be made to the alphabet of regular English. Questions and answers covered in this booklet provide information concerning its history, effectiveness, methods of use, teaching areas, and relationship to traditional orthography. A brief example of the i.t.a. is included. (JM)

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Questions and Answers About i.t.a.

i.t.a. Foundation — 1971

Q. What is i.t.a.?

A. i.t.a. stands for the Initial Teaching Alphabet, developed by Sir James Pitman, K.B.E. The Initial Teaching Alphabet is a specially designed, 44-character alphabet to be used in the teaching of reading English. It is not intended as a spelling reform. The characters which comprise the alphabet have been carefully designed to simplify the process of learning to read English and to make the transition from this teaching alphabet to our standard English alphabet and spelling rules as easy as possible. The idea of the alphabet is that each basic sound unit or phoneme in spoken English should have its own character in written form. The alphabet is not completely phonetic, since it is used as a teaching alphabet only. Thus, modifications from a perfectly phonetic alphabet have been made to insure easy transition.

Q. Why bother with a special alphabet?

A. Although there are only slightly more than 40 sounds comprising the English language, it has been estimated that there are over 2,200 ways to write them. The sound "i" alone has over twenty different spellings including:

> **I, eye, aye, high, is**land, **c**h**oir, try, a**isle, **buy, die, kite.**

Further, a given letter or set of letters may be pronounced in a number of different ways. For example, notice the varying sounds of the symbol **a**!

> **a**ll, **a**ny, w**a**nt, **a**t, g**a**te, f**a**ther.

In 1964, the Commissioner of Education, Dr. Francis Keppel, noted:

> Three of the most important studies in the history of reading research have now been completed. One of these studies demonstrates conclusively that the nature of the relationship between the spelling of a word and the sound of a word constitutes a major difficulty in learning to read and spell.

A specially designed alphabet to eliminate some of these inconsistencies until a child develops sufficient skill and confidence to cope with them one at a time, is an alternate technique to the traditional highly controlled vocabulary. Unlike the controlled vocabulary, a special alphabet permits the child to read anything he can say and comprehend. Thus, the materials prepared in i.t.a. can be more directly suited to the child's intellectual interests than those prepared in more typical beginning readers.

Q. Won't there be difficulties resulting from different pronounciations in different regional speech patterns?

A. In general, we each tend to assume when we look at a printed word, that it is pronounced as we are used to pronouncing it. Thus, although the English pronounce the word "clerk" as though it has an "a" in it (much like the Americans would pronounce the name Clark), they have no difficulty in recognizing the word. Actually, if a child hears a word incorrectly, and writes it in i.t.a. as he hears it, i.t.a. may prove to be a useful tool to aid in the improvement of speech and hearing difficulties.

Q. Isn't i.t.a. the alphabet developed by George Bernard Shaw?

A. No. Mr. Shaw, in his will, asked that a special alphabet be developed which would be completely phonetic. Shaw's goal was to have a spelling and alphabet reform. A sample of Shaw's alphabet is presented below, contrasted with i.t.a. and our conventional alphabet.

CS 001 097

The Shaw Alphabet: 𐑕𐑣𐑷 𐑨 𐑚 𐑒𐑮𐑨

𐑯𐑹𐑪𐑤𐑧𐑟

[𐑪𐑓𐑺𐑯𐑿: 𐑖𐑹𐑕𐑑 𐑕𐑬𐑖, 𐑮𐑹𐑮𐑦𐑙 𐑝 𐑤𐑲𐑪𐑯𐑟, 𐑒𐑮𐑦𐑕-
𐑦𐑩𐑯 𐑣𐑦𐑥 𐑓𐑱𐑯𐑑𐑤𐑦.

Shaw, Bernard *The Shaw Alphabet Edition of Androcles and the Lion*, Penguin Books, 1962

i.t.a.

androcleēs and the lieon

prœlog

œvertuer. forest sounds, roriŋ ov lieons, crist
ian hym fæntly.

T.O.

ANDROCLES AND THE LION

PROLOGUE

Overture: forest sounds, roaring of lions, Christian hymn faintly.

Sir James Pitman, was one of the executors of Shaw's will. His i.t.a., however, is not designed as a spelling reform, but only as a teaching medium. It has been carefully constructed to make for immediate and efficient transition from this special alphabet to regular English.

Q. Does i.t.a. work?

A. As of 1972 over eighty controlled studies of the comparative effectiveness of i.t.a. and our traditional alphabet and spellings have been conducted. Cumulatively, these studies have cost well over $1,000,000 and have used over 30,000 subjects. Using a variety of measures, approximately two-thirds of these studies have shown that i.t.a.-taught children score significantly higher than those taught with our traditional orthography (T.O.). The remaining one-third of the studies show no difference between the groups. Thus far **no study** has shown that i.t.a. taught children do generally worse than those taught with T.O. It is probably safe to say that no other approach to reading (or education in general) has been so thoroughly tested with such positive results.

Q. Are there reading failures in i.t.a.?

A. Yes, but the rates are much lower in comparison to T.O. taught children. For example, in one study conducted in Bethlehem, Pa. and published in 1971, 856 children were studied to determine indices of reading failure (515 in the i.t.a. classes and 341 taught with T.O.). They found that over 29% of the group repeated a grade compared to 9% of the i.t.a. group, further, over 14% of the T.O. group were assigned to remedial reading while 7% of the i.t.a. group required such support. The percent of students in this study both requiring remedial reading and repeating a grade was 8.5% for the T.O. children and 2.3% for those taught with i.t.a.

There are many causes of reading failure and while changing the medium has been shown to have a dramatic effect in reducing failure rates it can not address itself to all causes.

Q. How does i.t.a. compare in effectiveness with other reading methods?

A. i.t.a. is not a method — it is a medium. Even professionals ask this question, although it is not altogether a meaningful one. i.t.a. can be used with any good method, (phonic, look-say, etc.). It can be used with individual instruction. It can be combined with color, or used in teaching machines, programmed textbooks or educational television. It is not a method any more than is our conventional alphabet.

Q. Don't children in T.O. groups catch up with the i.t.a. children? And, if they do, why bother with i.t.a.?

A. Yes, they usually do although a few studies have found i.t.a. children "ahead" on some measures even into the 5th grade. Nonetheless, this is not a meaningful criteria. If the i.t.a. child is ahead of his peers, unless the post-i.t.a. curriculum is modified to build on whatever advantages may be present, the "lead" will not be maintained. Further, whether one maintains the lead or loses it, the "credit" or "blame" no longer goes to i.t.a., but rather to what one has most recently taught the child. The letters i.t.a. stand for "initial teaching alphabet" not "infinite traces alphabet." However, there are more meaningful ways of looking at this question. First, the rate of reading failure in i.t.a. is far lower than with T.O. Second, one could argue that even if an early advantage is subsequently lost, it is sensible and reasonable to use a medium which makes one's initial experience with reading and education in general, an easier and happier one.

Q. Does i.t.a. cost more than T.O. for materials?

A. No. Cost analyses suggest that i.t.a. materials per-pupil cost is within pennies of other comparable T.O. texts and supplementary materials. Further, the reduction in the number of remedial cases tends to make i.t.a. far more economical in the long run.

Q. How widely is i.t.a. being used?

A. i.t.a. has had a remarkable growth. It was first used in an experiment conducted at the University of London in 1961 with only 20 classes. By 1971 almost 20% of all children in Great Britain were learning to read with i.t.a., including members of the Royal family. In the United States there are no comparably accurate figures, but it is clear that almost 1,000,000 children have learned to read with the new medium. Many school systems use i.t.a. exclusively in beginning reading in the U.S. In Canada, (like the U.S.) the usage varies from province to province, but for example according to at least one estimate, almost 2/3 of the children in Vancouver are using i.t.a. Another indication of i.t.a.'s growth is that almost 100 companies in the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada are producing i.t.a. materials. There are over 2,000 children's books available in i.t.a., and 5 companies have manufactured i.t.a. typewriters.

Q. At what age can the Initial Teaching Alphabet be used?

A. There is wide disagreement among reading experts as to the most appropriate age to begin instruction in formal reading. According to some, a child must be six or seven to master the inconsistencies of the English language. (Many experts in the fiield disagree, however, and believe you can begin with younger children.) Perhaps the best indication one may give as to the effectiveness of i.t.a. with very young children is to point to the success of the studies conducted in Great Britain. In the English system of education, children start their education one year earlier than they do in America. In addition, the English begin reading instruction at their kindergarten level. Thus, English children have been learning to read with the Initial Teaching Alphabet as early as four years of age.

Q. Won't children be confused using two alphabets at the same time?

A. With the traditional alphabet, children are really faced with three different alphabets — upper case, lower case and cursive. The research with i.t.a. shows that the two alphabets do not present problems for children. Some children simply say that they have their school alphabet and their home alphabet. They see no conflict between the two. Others do not see any difference because the design of characters is so compatible with our traditional alphabet.

Q. Won't children have difficulty "unlearning" a special alphabet?

A. This does not seem to be a problem. Twenty-four of the traditional 26 letters are included in i.t.a. Most of the others appear to adults as simple combinations of letters which occur frequently. A few characters are special to i.t.a. The child seems to have no trouble separating the combinations and dropping the special characters. Rather than unlearning, the child finds i.t.a. a natural step to T.O.

Q. Do children find difficulty in making the transition to traditional print?

A. No. Teachers who have used i.t.a. are almost unanimous in noting how easily the transition is made. This is possible because the alphabets are highly compatible and because the children are constantly absorbing many T.O. words out of school.

Q. Does it matter if children read some T.O. books out of school?

A. No. Indeed it is probably a help when they come to the transition, already to have read many words in T.O. On the other hand they make better progress if their practice be concentrated on i.t.a. material certainly up to the time for the transition.

Q. Does the transition require formal instruction from the teacher?

A. No. The child ordinarily achieves the transition without any special instruction. It is helpful, however, for the teacher to explain about capital letters and certain very common words with irregular spelling. Some text publishers build in procedures for transition, while others have found that it occurs naturally.

Q. When should children make the transition to traditional orthography?

A. Most teachers who have used i.t.a. believe that the child makes the transition when he is ready. According to most research this comes at the end of one year on the average. It should be emphasized, however, that this is an average, which means that some children will not have made the transition at this time. While the major goal is to have all children reading effectively in T.O., there would seem to be every advantage in developing a child's confidence in and love of reading by erring on the side of "too much" of a logical medium like i.t.a. rather than failing to take full advantage of the possible gains by "too little" exposure.

Q. Won't children have trouble spelling in T.O. after they have learned i.t.a.?

A. Research results seem to indicate no additional difficulties with conventional spelling for children who have learned with i.t.a. In fact, many studies indicate that i.t.a.-taught children spell better in traditional English. It should be pointed out here that they are not necessarily "good" spellers. It is simply that they frequently spell better than those who learn to read conventionally. While there is no explanation for this that can be carefully documented, the arguments in support of the data include: an improved attitude toward school and reading on the part of i.t.a.-taught children; the fact that they are exposed to a greater number of printed words in i.t.a. than equivalently T.O.-trained children; the fact that the i.t.a. children write more; and the fact that very substantial numbers of words in i.t.a. have either identical or nearly identical spellings to those in T.O. Thus, children who learn with i.t.a. seem to have substantially greater opportunities for learning and practice. Further, the child is not burdened by the difficulties of reading and spelling simultaneously. Once he has developed confidence in his ability to read, he can concentrate on spelling in the "grown up" alphabet.

Q. How does i.t.a. affect a child's writing ability?

A. A number of studies have been conducted of children's early writing ability after using i.t.a. They tend to show that children who learn to read with i.t.a. write considerably more, at a higher intellectual level, using more advanced vocabulary, and with greater independence from the teacher, than children who learn to read with traditional orthography.

Q. Does i.t.a. affect a child's attitude toward school?

A. There are few, if any, good measures of children's attitude toward school. To answer this question in general, however, teachers report fewer behavior problems, more positive excitement about school, greater independence, and more reading among children who have learned to read with i.t.a. than among those whom they have taught with traditional orthography. They usually attribute these differences to the greater interest level and intellectual challenge which it is possible to generate when more complex material is presented through this less complex alphabet, as well as fewer frustrations encountered with a higher relationship between what they hear and what they see.

Q. Can i.t.a. be used for remedial reading, or is it just for beginning reading?

A. Most of the research thus far has been in the area of beginning reading. As a result, only small studies have been conducted in the remedial area, and it is difficult to generalize from the results although they have been generally positive. Theoretically, there is no reason to believe that i.t.a. would not be completely suitable for a remedial reading program. For many students in remedial programs, the different appearance of the alphabet suggests a fresh start which has a salutary effect on attitude.

Q. Can i.t.a. be used with adults?

A. The use of i.t.a. with functional illiterates in the British Army has been highly successful. i.t.a. seems particularly suitable for use with adults since the nearly phonetic quality of the alphabet permits the use of a relatively advanced vocabulary. This means that materials can be tailored to the interest and vocabulary level of adults.

Q. Can i.t.a. be used in teaching English as a Second Language?

A. i.t.a. is being used to teach English as a Second Language on a small scale in several European and Asian countries. There is also a large scale study being conducted in the Gambia. In the United States, several projects are presently investigating the use of i.t.a. in teaching English to Spanish-speaking children. To be appropriately cautious, all that can be said at this time is that the results are encouraging and indicate that this alphabet is likely to be of substantial assistance in teaching English as a Second Language.

Q. Can i.t.a. be used in special education with exceptional children?

A. i.t.a. research in special education has been on a relatively small scale. It is necessary, therefore, to think in terms of what the data points to rather than make definite claims. The Initial Teaching Alphabet has been used successfully with emotionally disturbed children and with children who have speech and hearing difficulties. Some researchers are beginning to use this medium to teach fundamentals of reading to the mentally retarded and brain-damaged children. Here again, then, the early research with this simple medium has been encouraging.

Q. What teacher training is required?

A. Usually a two-day introduction to the alphabet and its use. Such training courses are offered by both commercial and non-profit corporations and universities. The i.t.a. Foundation disseminates information about their availability.

Q. Does this method entail a lot of "unlearning" of previous reading methodology?

A. No — all good teaching methods apply to i.t.a.; indeed they should work even better when no longer operating in an adverse medium. The training course permits a study of the ways in which i.t.a. can be integrated into accepted methodology.

Q. Are there any spelling rules in i.t.a. or can you spell any way you want?

A. Sir James Pitman did not restrict the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet. However, he requires that publishers use the characters as he designed them and the standard spellings, in order to publish materials to be called i.t.a. To avoid excessive confusion as the child shifts from book to book or from school to school, regularities in appearance and spelling are essential. This adherence to the characters and spellings of i.t.a. as a standard for all classroom materials is welcomed by publishers and teachers and the i.t.a. Foundation offers "certification" to publishers so that teachers can be assured that books labelled as i.t.a. do indeed use those same characters and spelling. Simple spelling rules have been evolved to ease the transition to T.O. (Traditional Orthography). As only one example of such a spelling rule, i.t.a. uses double consonants whenever they appear in English. For example, take the words "letter," "happy," and "ball." Each of these could be spelled with the single consonant in a special alphabet without confusion, but both consonant characters are to be printed in i.t.a. Use of this spelling rule facilitates later transition. On the other hand, most teachers using i.t.a. agree that children do not have to conform spellings to the standard but are in order so long as their spelling is rational.

Q. Should teachers insist upon correct i.t.a. spelling?

A. Spelling is not ordinarily corrected unless it shows that a child is using a character incorrectly through a misunderstanding of its sound value or has a defect in his speech habits. Since the child is going to shift to T.O. later there is no need for him to fully master even the simple spelling rules of this nearly phonetic alphabet.

Q. Does it matter if the teacher makes a spelling mistake?

A. Spelling should be as correct as possible, and that is not difficult because within very obvious rules for conserving as high degree of similarity as is compatible with alphabetism the spelling follows sound so closely. Mistakes which are made through the use of alternative forms rather than through incorrect sound values are not harmful.

Q. What about parents teaching their own children to read with i.t.a.?

A. This is wisely left to the teacher. Few parents have the training or experience to carry through an i.t.a. program to full advantage. i.t.a. is, after all, only an alphabet which the experienced professional teacher may use more effectively than our conventional alphabet. It does not make even the educated layman a professional reading teacher.

Q. Is there much resistance to i.t.a.?

A. Yes, some. Parents of i.t.a.-taught children tend to react very favorably, and most teachers who have used i.t.a. are extremely enthusiastic about it. Most of the negative views seem to be expressed by those who have had little direct experience with it, and from some "experts" in the reading "establishment." The criticisms of i.t.a. started with a fear that children would have difficulty learning to read and would experience undesirable side effects. (Research and practical knowledge show the opposite to be the case.) Next, the fear was that i.t.a. children would be poor spellers in T.O. (This is not supported by the data.) The argument then shifted to "It's too expensive" (not supported by cost analysis) and then to, "Its effects are short lived, (this is not supported by the data either.) Lately, the criticism seems to be, "We now have better techniques." (No evidence is available for this.) The source of opposition may simply be one of general resistance to change and or the economic and psychological impact on "experts" and publishers when the medium for reading is modified and hence, the assumptions about reading problems and strategies used to deal with them.

ðis iz printed in ðe iniʃhial tꭓchiŋ alfabet, ðe purpos ov which iz not, az miet bꭓ suppœzd, tω reform our spelliŋ, but tω imprœv ðe lerniŋ ov rꭓdiŋ. it iz intended ðat when ðe beginner iz flœent in ðis mꭓdium hꭓ ʃhωd bꭓ confiend tω rꭓdiŋ in ðe tradiʃhonal alfabet

if yœ hav red az far az ðis, ðe nue mꭓdium will hav prœvd tω yœ several points, ðe mœst important ov which iz ðat yœ, at eny rꭓt, hav ꭓzily mꭓd ðe ʧhænj from ðe ordinary rœman alfabet with convenʃhonal spelliŋz tω ðe iniʃhial tꭓchiŋ alfabet with systematic spelliŋ.

The Initial Teaching Alphabet Foundation is a non-profit, educational foundation located on the campus of Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. For further information about the Foundation's activities write to Dr. J. R. Block, Executive Director, i.t.a. Foundation, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York 11550.